

# DENTISTRY: TIME FOR A NEW MEANING?

## AUTHORS

**Nairn H. F. Wilson CBE DSc (h.c.)  
DDent (h.c.) PhD, FFGDP(UK),  
FDS (Edin, Glasg, Eng)**

Chair, Board of Trustees, College of General Dentistry

**Ian J. Mills PhD, BDS (Glasg.),  
FFGDP (UK), FDS RCPS (Glasg.),  
FHEA, MJDF RCS (Eng.), Dip Imp  
Dent RCS (Eng.)**

Dean, Faculty of General Dental Practice (UK)  
and Trustee, College of General Dentistry

## Change is constant

The meaning and use of words are constantly evolving. Dental terminology is no exception. Influencing factors include, amongst others, new knowledge, understanding and approaches and changes in attitudes and philosophies. If the meaning and use of certain words do not evolve with changing circumstances, they run the risk of becoming redundant and replaced.

## Options

The common understanding and use of the term 'dentistry' has changed little in recent times, despite a paradigm shift in approach and philosophy within the profession, linked to huge advances in knowledge and understanding over the last thirty years. During this time of dynamic change, the dental profession has progressively moved away from the treatment of disease to focus on the maintenance of health through prevention and minimum intervention, aimed at patients enjoying the enhanced quality of life benefits of functional 'teeth for life'.

In many situations, the term 'oral healthcare' is being used in preference to 'dentistry', given the 'needle in the gum', 'drill and fill' type connotations of 'dentistry'. Rather than running the risk of 'dentistry' becoming a term which is increasingly used to describe the work of dentists prior to modern oral healthcare provision, should 'dentistry' be given new meaning and thereby be preserved, together with related terms – notably 'dentist' – which, like 'dentistry', could suffer a progressive demise in everyday language?

Some could take the view that the term 'dentistry' has had its day and there is much to be gained by promoting and capitalising on the use of new terminology (e.g. oral healthcare) to, in effect, rebrand the profession and its service to society. In other words, an

opportunity to shake off the old, tired image and acquire a new one fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Above all else, what would be least helpful would be an increasing trend towards the interchangeable use of 'dentistry' and 'oral healthcare', and 'dentist' and 'oral healthcare professional'. This could potentially lead to confusion for patients when offered the alternatives of general dentistry and oral healthcare to be provided by a dentist or oral healthcare professional. This confusion could even extend to the profession, other healthcare professionals, or within the healthcare system. The last thing we need going forward is a confused profession deploying different messages to persuade the patients it serves, let alone the rest of the population, that it is something other than it used to be.

## New meaning

Is it time to preserve the term 'dentistry' by the profession, individually and collectively, giving it new meaning? The authors would answer with conviction in the affirmative, and state unequivocally that this is a critical step-change in modernising our profession. This is not semantics, or an academic exercise in the use of language, it is about communicating the changing and expanding role and purpose of the dental team. It is about reflecting the ever-increasing breadth of knowledge and scope of practice of the profession and the vital role which oral health plays within general health, and the importance of integrating modern oral healthcare within holistic healthcare provision. It is also about the changing oral health needs and expectations of the population, and the workforce that will respond to these challenges. Dentistry should no longer be considered as dentists' episodic attempts to fight and combat disease, but as the dental team supporting patients, through longitudinal care to maintain oral health throughout life. In contrast to traditional fillings,

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extractions and dentures, preventatively orientated, minimum intervention, longitudinal person-centred care empowers individuals to assume ownership of their oral health. This is the key to dispelling the belief that dentists look after patients' teeth when, in reality, they are the occasional 'visitors' in patients' lives to support and encourage them to practise effective, daily oral health maintenance.

Considering the new meaning of 'dentistry', it must encompass the concept of modern oral healthcare, the full range of available therapies and new and emerging technologies. The 20<sup>th</sup> century image of 'dentistry' must be assigned to history in the process of achieving sustainable, transformational improvements in oral health. Giving 'dentistry' new meaning and image may, in addition, play an important role in recruiting the right people to become the future generations of dental healthcare professionals best able to realise the unrealised potential of the profession.

A simplistic approach to giving new meaning to 'dentistry' would be to claim that dentistry is what state-of-the-art dental healthcare professionals do. This 'what it says on the tin' approach may have a certain appeal; however, it fails to achieve the goal on several counts. Alternatively, a new definition could be considered, for example: 'The element of healthcare focused on the prevention of oral and dental disease and the maintenance of oral health as an important contribution to general health and wellbeing'. Such meaning, which puts terminology such as 'oral healthcare' in context, is considered to

offer many different opportunities to reposition and change existing, outdated perceptions of 'dentistry'.

### Effecting change

It is one thing deciding on a new meaning for a term such as 'dentistry', but a very different matter having it accepted, widely understood and applied. A concerted, individual and collective effort is required within the profession to change the public understanding of 'dentistry'. In addition to the careful use of words and phraseology in communications with patients and the media, judicious editing in dental journal and periodicals will make a difference. If the profession wishes to change its enduring image, it must work hard to change public perception and thinking. Dentistry must be seen to be a friendly, supportive element of general healthcare, rather than a 'grin and bear it' service, often to relieve oral and dental pain and discomfort. There are already many exemplary good practices, but regrettably, a significant number of these are negated by outdated systems, which persist in rewarding episodic treatment interventions rather than effective prevention in longitudinal care, such as payments for check-ups and interventional treatments rather than for oral healthcare assessments and supportive care. As eloquently argued by Watt et al.,<sup>1</sup> now is the time for radical action to change outdated systems. From experience, change, in the absence of a *Blue Planet* moment capable of a dramatic, sudden shift in public understanding and attitude, is unlikely to occur quickly, but can be greatly facilitated by bottom up action.

### New dawn

Getting from where we are to where we should be in the common use and understanding of 'dentistry' may seem wistful thinking, if not irrelevant to some and 'mission impossible' to others. The authors would profoundly disagree; it is a critical step in modernising our profession. If we want something different, a different approach is necessary to motivate existing members of the dental team and inspire the next generation of oral healthcare providers. Dentistry is frequently referred to as the "Cinderella"<sup>2</sup> of healthcare, with the laudable efforts of those working in specifically primary dental care being overlooked. We believe that the establishment of a new collegiate home for all members of the dental team – the College of General Dentistry (CGDent) – will help change this situation by providing a much-needed platform and voice for the whole dental profession. It is time to redefine the meaning of dentistry, and to support the formation of a forward-looking CGDent. To help this process, visit the CGDent website ([www.cgdent.uk](http://www.cgdent.uk)) to register your support and get involved with what is destined to become a historic transformational development in dentistry.

### REFERENCES

- 1 Watt RG, Daly B, Allison P, et al. Ending the neglect of global oral health: time for radical change. *Lancet*. 2019;394(10194):261–272.
- 2 Hayashi M, Haapasalo M, Imazato S, et al. Dentistry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: challenges of a globalising world. *Int Dent J*. 64(6):333–42.

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## TO HEAR MORE FROM FGDP(UK)'S DEAN, IAN MILLS, CHECK OUT HIS NEW BLOG

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*"It is Wednesday morning 18th March 2020. Like many others, I am currently trying to understand the enormity of the situation which is unfolding around me. It is a bit like watching a trailer for an apocalyptic film, but then realising that you are part of the cast."*



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